

'CLASSICISING' - KK FIORRUCCI

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The pest controller's embarrassment at having to brush dirty knickers out of the way as he stuck his head in the laundry hole; sniffing out something unwanted.

The slow steps of the double bass making its way down the hill, case in hand. Wouldn't it be good if you could carry around your own shadow, swap places whenever you felt like a nap.

The black, boxy fields around Rothwell. Nothing in most of them; no room for much to grow, except cabbages.

The serrated blade of the spire plunging up through the city, scraping the cloud's raw-pink chin.

Fantatising about excitable reunions with women who don't remember my name.

The streets brown and wriggling like the dock after a full catch.

Returning to Blasket.

Wondering why painters are entitled to 'phases', but writers are obliged to produce a distinct style, early on, which they merely hone, until death, either corporeal or professional. Talentless dabblers if they do not.

Wondering about the literary equivalent of a painterly flourish.

Upstairs in Muchoo Mocha are piles of the *New Yorker* tied up with string. I read a John Lanchester story whose twist surprises me even though I have skipped ahead to a final note which reads 'John Lanchester on Ghost Stories.'

Wondering whether, in that carriage, it would be more awkward to speak or to stay silent.

Also in Muchoo Mocha: a collection of 'short novels', a black and white picture of Ali-era Will Smith and a painting of the Friends cast. Ross' bicep is large and inexplicably foregrounded. Joey is all wrong. The others are exceptionally well-rendered.

The *New Yorker* connects with New York and October three years ago. New York connects with Seattle two years ago; a coast flipped, a year folded away. I mention to my mother that their story would be one worth telling, possessing a clear beginning, middle and end. Life, more often than not, follows a classical structure.

There are no endings, only further twists.

My mother's sentences do not follow a classical structure. There are fun downhill; a moody crowd of inkcaps encountered on the View, the rare caterpillar breathing its last on the hottest day of the year, its species doubted by certain self-appointed deacons of West Yorkshire lepidoptery – later, consecrated. There are holes, as well, too many to count – minor injuries from minor characters whom, in any case, she had been planning to excise, and the usual job-lot of worry, grief, regret. Hearing that the story is, or 'might be' worth telling, makes my mother well up like that yellow Lamy of mine she has been claiming not to covet. I set out the bones of it, look up. She's fine; finds nothing unsavoury in the idea that her life could be 'material'. Unembarrassed by her own part in the story. No details to brush away, feelings to censor. It was Robert who got ahead of himself, on more than one occasion, sailed out into his imagination until he glimpsed, thought he glimpsed, the pale strand where she'd be waiting. Instead, my mother was on the mainland, with binoculars, watching him prance about, from time to time, while she busied herself with other things. Raising me, for instance.

She came for Vincent and left with Rob; or rather, Rob's address, scrawled on a pornographic Dutch postcard and decorated with a would-be psychedelic border of flowers, clouds, hearts and lips. In the hotel, she turned the card over and over until the lips smudged and the corners crumpled.

Pornography, dear. No.

The girl is the fourth person to ask me about the purpose and destination of the Free Bus. The first is a husky woman in a leopard coat, to whom I have explained that the Free Bus leads merely to a bus station, from which it might be possible to journey elsewhere, and who knows, maybe where we've all been heading before 'The Flood'. The second, an E. type, attached, regrettably, to some phone-glued juggins, but featuring good eye-contact. The third I have been eyeballing on the recently-suspended Northern Trains service. We exchange glances at what is generally believed to be the stop for the Free Bus. Finally, she asks me what's going on, having, more conspicuously than she imagines, thought

better of it twice. I give her the information I have, and she breaks in search of a taxi, perhaps to save face for having nothing interesting to say in reply. In a few minutes, it will transpire that this is not a bus to a bus, as I have claimed, but a bus to a train. But neither of us know this, it hardly matters, and she is gone.

My mother gets the beginning well enough, and the end too, though it's harder to contemplate, but the middle does not stick out at all. Nobody remembers middles, I explain. 'What about the tapes? Maybe you should listen to the tapes.'

This was later, much later.

It was an address – either you wrote and the person wrote back, or you did not, they did not. There was something to gain from writing – friendship, of the quiet, intermittent, treasured kind – very little, as far as she could see, to lose; the money needed to send an ounce or less of paper across the Atlantic, the paper itself, pen, ink, of suitable quality – she had these already – and time, of which there was plenty.

Yes. It wasn't quite like that. I don't know what I hoped would happen. But you use your imagination. Creative licence as they call it.

She looked at the doodles again, thought about the other drawings he'd done, copies from her sketchbook – wedding guests, wheat fields, farmhands, cavaliers. He drew well, had the kind of skill that comes from careful study and intense concentration; that can and does improve, little by little, reaching a new agility in middle life, if not quite mastery; finally, in old age, to everyone's surprise, and with other things on the wane, blossoming, with the vigour and vividness (almost, almost) of

youthful talent. For now, he was merely competent, a sort of Jan van Nobody to her Frans Hals. Still, she could not stop looking at the childish drawing. She dropped the postcard in the wastepaper and fished it out an hour later, relieved to have felt nothing at losing it.

The path down from Dunquin ('Doon-ka-ween') rolls out in a long coil around the hill until it detects the serious edges of the jetty and the cold breath of the sea. Sometimes, slinking down in the evening, it finds the sea on tiptoes, ready and waiting, as soon as you round the last bend, but now it is shy, embarrassed by all the new people. The hill is steep; it slips loosely around his muscles, then tugs hard, like a bridle. Other people are running; either because they know something he does not, which would be strange since he has been specifically instructed not to rush, or merely as a function of gradient – something is happening to him now as well; he is leaning forward, arms out, as though he were preparing to somersault directly into the ocean, heels kicking the back of his thighs, and he is going so fast now that, if he tripped, he would keep sliding until he had had swallowed the whole group of islands, and chugged down the Atlantic for good measure, and then where would he be, and what – a large mammal in a muddy trench, on a mattress of rotting fish. At the next bend, he composes himself, drops back to a saunter. The sea flashes around him.

Hills are always steep in the imagination. As time passes, they attract more and more steepness, and other qualities besides. Slipperiness, for instance. Further twists.

I think, overall. I wish we hadn't met that second time. Left it as, you know.

I cannot stand up straight and shift around until my cheek is actually pressed against the window, sneaking a look at the girl, who is admiring the ceiling with her lips lightly apart. She doo doo does a made-up tune. It would have been better for us both, I realise, if I had stayed quiet, but it's too late now.

Very good, dear. Always liked Frans Hals. Keep going.

Keep going.